Outcome Evaluation of School Social Work Services

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OVERVIEW

As many Wisconsin school districts' budgets become tighter, accountability of educational programs and services has become even more imperative. Pupil services professionals have traditionally been able to provide adequate process or formative evaluation data, e.g., how many students were seen, how many evaluations and support groups were conducted, how many home visits were made, but little has typically been done to conduct outcome or summative evaluation. This is in large part due to the difficulty, time and resources involved in traditional outcome evaluation of prevention and early intervention services.

Newspapers commonly report the results of statewide, standardized tests of area school districts and school buildings, often in ways that facilitate comparison with each other. Consequently, academic achievement and performance on these tests may become communities' primary "yard sticks" for their respective school districts. School boards may in turn place greater value on instruction and services that enhance academic achievement when considering budget cuts.

As a result, now more than ever before, school social workers need to document positive outcomes for students related to the provision of their work. The challenge is to locally design a simple, valid evaluation system that addresses the priorities of the school district while not consuming inordinate amounts of time and resources. This paper 1) reviews available, relevant literature regarding outcome evaluation of school social work services, 2) includes salient passages from this literature which provide critical direction in designing outcome evaluation, 3) provides suggestions to help guide local design, and 4) outlines a process to develop an outcome evaluation plan using readily available data commonly gathered by school districts that reflects progress on school districts' goals and is indicative of the positive impact of school social work services.

SUMMARY OF LITERATURE REVIEW

A Practice Effectiveness Series paper from the National Association of Social Work (NASW) School Social Work Section (1997), *School Social Work Interventions That Work*, summarized 67 studies addressing school social work service outcomes. The studies are divided into five areas: 1) school performance, 2) social problem solving, 3) family functioning, 4) psychological coping, and 5) home-school relations. Summaries of preschool studies showed "when school social workers systematically involved parents in their preschoolers' education, the children achieved notable improvements on measures of school readiness and school adjustment." (p. 2) This finding is consistent with other literature that demonstrates students' academic achievement is enhanced significantly when their parents are involved in their educations. On the middle school level, "a combination of counseling, educational intervention, and linkage to services, resulted in improved school attendance, gains in academic achievement, and improvements in classroom behavior." (p. 2) Another reported finding at the middle school level was "at risk students who had received task-centered case management services showed a significant improvement in their report card grades, school attendance, and teacher-reported classroom behavior." (p. 3) Only anecdotal information was found concerning the effectiveness of school social work on the high school level.

A publication from the UCLA School Mental Health Project, Introductory Packet on Evaluation and Accountability: Getting Credit for All You Do! (1997) reviewed work done by Strupp and Hadley (1977) and a report by the Center for School Mental Health Assistance which convened a panel of national experts in Baltimore in 1996 "to explore relevant issues and methods to document the effectiveness of school mental health services" (p. 42). This review examined the different interested parties that have a stake in accountability, including the community and the school,

and the different indicators and measures each party requires. It is instructive to note that the accountability factors valued by the *community* are those issues commonly addressed by school social workers:

- adolescent pregnancy,
- family preservation and youth foster care placements,
- homelessness,
- juvenile crime,
- emotional and behavioral problems,
- substance abuse,
- youth employment and readiness for adult employment, and
- violence, including child abuse and suicide.

However, school social workers are not employed by community-based organizations, e.g., counties or cities. Rather, they are primarily responsible to their respective school districts. The priority accountability factors for *schools* identified in this publication differ significantly from those listed above and are more oriented toward academic-related outcomes:

- academic achievement and grades,
- graduation rates,
- students continuing on to post-secondary education,
- cooperation and good work habits,
- school attendance,
- school violence and aggression,
- established linkages between the child and other needed services,
- suspensions and expulsions, and
- referrals for misbehavior and learning problems.

This publication from the UCLA School Mental Health Project also included a number of statements that are instructive when trying to design simple, valid outcome evaluation systems for pupil services. The bracketed phrases in italics are added to highlight the different stakeholders, i.e., the community and the school district, that are the focus of this article.

- "Data are gathered on indicators that reflect the institution's *[i.e., school district's]* purposes." (p. 19)
- "When it is clear that student data are needed, the next consideration is whether the information already is in accessible, existing records." (p. 31)
- "With respect to societal *[i.e., community]* and institutional *[i.e., school district]* accountability, the data sample initially consists of that which can be readily gathered on a regular basis. Subsequently, again reflecting matters of greatest concern to those demanding accountability *[i.e., the school board and administration]*, step by step strategies can be developed to establish systems for amassing regular findings related to key variables and specific population subgroups." (p. 18)
- "In gathering data related to intervention effectiveness, it is important to remember that some interventions are meant to change the school, classroom, home, and so forth. When interventions are designed to alter environments, then sound accountability focuses not just on assessing students but also evaluating environmental changes. Often, the primary need is to assess how well external barriers to learning have been addressed." (p. 31)
- ". . . it can be extremely costly and time consuming to be accountable to all parties with interests in the productivity of an intervention. In most situations, the reality is that only a sample of data can be gathered." (p. 18)

In addition to identifying accountability issues for different stakeholder groups, members of the Baltimore panel made comments that were considered noteworthy conclusions and are instructive to the purpose of this article.

- "In essence, most school-based mental health programs should be interested in evaluating the effectiveness of programs, not in evaluating the efficacy of particular treatments." (p. 47)
- If school-based mental health programs strive to target 'resilience factors,' or variables that have been shown in the literature to promote positive psychosocial adjustment in youth under stress (e.g., family support, social skills, involvement in meaningful activities), the likelihood that these programs will show positive and meaningful impacts should be improved.
- There is a continuum of school-based mental health programs in terms of their sophistication and resources available to them. 'Cadillac' programs will have a much greater chance of documenting program benefits than smaller, more isolated programs. In essence, program planners should consider the 'minimum threshold for evaluation' to avoid the worst case scenario of evaluating a small program, finding negative results, and then losing funding. Generally, the group recommended that comprehensive evaluations only be conducted for programs (i.e., not one part-time clinician in one school), that preferably have institutional backing (e.g., from a university or community health/mental health agency). *[Note: the context for this panel's review included school-based mental health programs that receive significant community funding from third party payers, managed care companies, etc., an arrangement that is uncommon in Wisconsin]*
- Evaluation should be tailored to the size and nature of the school-based mental health program. Small programs should emphasize evaluation of the impacts for individual children, and should not undertake systems evaluations, as systems level changes will probably not be shown. Systems level evaluations should be limited to larger programs with more resources. Essentially, school-based mental health programs should conduct a 'self-evaluation process,' to guide decisions about the appropriate evaluation strategy." (p. 47)

Finally, the Baltimore panel also generated a list of principles that characterize good evaluation of pupil services programs.

1. "Being relevant to the type of services provided and the population served,
2. having an evaluation system that would be generalizable to different programs and different student populations,
3. viewing evaluation as an ongoing process, which provides feedback to efforts to continuously improve services,
4. attending to cultural sensitivity in evaluation processes and measures,
5. involving key 'stakeholders' in the evaluation process, such as students, families, school staff, and funders,
6. including multiple levels of assessment, for example, measuring student grades and absenteeism, as well as satisfaction of teachers with the program,
7. being relatively simple and 'doable,'
8. focusing on factors that are likely to be affected by the program, and
9. using measures that are 'face valid,' or make sense to those completing them." (p. 43)

There are other articles that provide additional critical direction in the development of outcome evaluation of school social work services. In a paper that discusses how school social workers can evaluate their practice on a regular basis without the additional expenditure of significant time or cost, Staudt and Alter (1992) identify six best practices:

1. "The target of the evaluation effort must be stated. Is intervention for the purpose of individual change or group change?
2. The goal of the intervention must be operationalized and described in measurable terms. Poor self-concept, acting out behavior, and poor peer relations are examples that need to be described in more concrete and measurable terms.
3. A reliable and valid measuring instrument(s) or data collection must be chosen. This device must accurately measure the behavior that one hopes to change through intervention. This same measuring tool is used during the intervention at several different times.
4. Related to the above, it must be decided from whom the data will be collected - e.g., student, teacher, or parent. This needs to be a collaborative effort. A school social worker cannot expect a teacher to complete a checklist or observe certain behaviors if the teacher has not been involved from the very beginning in assessment and intervention planning.

5. The frequency of collecting data must be decided. While data must be collected several times during the intervention, the situation itself will impact on how often data are collected. Obviously you will not ask a student to complete a self-concept scale on a daily basis. You may ask that same student to count on a daily basis the number of times he or she initiated contact with another student.
6. If practice evaluation is to have an impact beyond an individual social worker's practice, then a means of aggregating data across practitioners must be established. Staudt and Craft (1992) describe an information management system that has been used in school social work practice. Such a system can begin to provide overall effectiveness of certain interventions with various population groups." (p. 56)

Allen-Meares, Washington, and Welsh (1996) cite nine modalities identified by Radin to assess school social work services: 1) hard data, i.e., school records, 2) tests, 3) observations, 4) rating scales, 5) questionnaires, 6) simulations, i.e., role plays, 7) graphics, i.e., mapping behavioral change over time, 8) interviews, and 9) self reports. The authors note these methods range from quantitative, e.g., tests and hard data, to qualitative, e.g., self-reports and interviews. Notable conclusions include:

- "Quantitative modalities that document service effectiveness tend to influence administrators, boards of education, and funding sources more than the qualitative modalities which stress thoughts, experiences, and observations." (p. 295)
- "Although any of or all of the above will facilitate the job of evaluating, the keys to achieving outcome and program evaluation are (1) the development of a plan for evaluation at the time a service is designed, (2) discipline to maintain accurate records during the service period, and (3) the fortitude to complete the evaluation and reporting process." (p. 301)
- "In addition, when a summative report is submitted to administration, the contribution of social work service is substantiated. In times of financial retrenchment, when jobs are on the line, social workers often scramble to defend their worth. For the social worker who has maintained yearly reports, data are readily available and convincing." (p. 305)

CONCLUSIONS FROM THE LITERATURE REVIEW

1. *Determine what the priorities of your school district are and design an outcome evaluation system that will demonstrate how your services contribute to at least one of those priorities.* Most school districts have established plans with goals that have been endorsed by their respective school boards. Some of these goals may match well with school social work services, e.g., increased parent involvement, improved linkages and collaboration with the greater community. Invariably, at least one of these goals addresses academic achievement and, more typically now, stresses the importance of *all* students reaching high academic standards. School social workers have traditionally worked with the most disenfranchised students who, for circumstances often beyond their control, have had difficulty achieving academically. School social workers have an ideal opportunity to show how their services are a critical part of the school-community if indeed *all* students are to reach high academic standards.

2. *Determine what data is already collected and available. Use that whenever possible.* Schools collect a great deal of student information that can be accessed in either individual or aggregate forms without administration of additional tests, checklists, etc. Examining existing school records before and after interventions to determine if changes occurred in any of these factors is a simple and straightforward method of outcome evaluation.

3. *Design your outcome evaluation system to match the scope of your school social work services.* If your services target individual students, the data you choose to access and use should be related to those same students. If your services involve a school-wide intervention, then your chosen data should reflect school-wide changes, e.g., aggregate student data.

4. *When designing your outcome evaluation system, be sure to involve others in the school-community who will be involved in providing and gathering the data.* This means talking to teachers, other pupil service providers,

secretaries, teacher aides, police liaison officers, anyone who either will be asked to provide new information, e.g., through a checklist, or to provide help with accessing existing data, e.g., attendance or discipline records. Be sure to have the support of the people you will have to depend upon to implement your outcome evaluation system. Ideally, activities of all pupil service providers within the school district (or at least the school building) are designed, implemented and evaluated on a collaborative basis.

5. *Make sure the variables you decide to evaluate are the correct ones, i.e., the variables will accurately reflect changes in the behaviors, knowledge, and/or skills the school social work service is designed to impact.* Clearly, if you're trying to reduce truancy, the primary variable is school attendance. Other times, it may be harder to determine what variable(s) will be affected by the intervention. For instance, family interventions may not initially yield readily apparent changes in school performance. In situations like that, look for variables that have consistently been shown over time through research to significantly impact student achievement, e.g., increased parental involvement, students eating breakfast prior to school on a regular basis. Another method is to simply use a common sense approach, e.g., a student who reduces the number of times he/she falls asleep in class can pay attention better to classroom instruction. Ultimately, the variables chosen to evaluate should have a clear link to students' improved school performance associated with the school social work service.

6. *Whenever possible, gather data on multiple variables from multiple sources.* There's an old saying, "Don't put all of your eggs in one basket." It holds true for evaluation, too. You have a much better chance of demonstrating the impact of your school social work services if you are looking for changes in more than one variable and are gathering this information from more than one person or source.

7. *Don't try to evaluate everything you do. Rather, select at least one program or service to evaluate and do it well.* You are better off having solid outcome data on a single aspect of your school social work services that clearly demonstrates a benefit valued by your school board than to have evaluation data "a mile wide and an inch deep" that can be easily dismissed or ignored.

8. *Keep the KIS rule in mind: Keep It Simple. Your outcome evaluation system should be simple, "doable," and based upon common sense evident to people outside pupil services and education.* Your audience is not a group of university professors or the editors of a professional journal. If your outcome evaluation system can only be understood by someone trained in evaluation, then you may have trouble communicating what data you collected and how you did it to school board members. In addition, you may have difficulty gaining the support of fellow school and community colleagues to carry out the evaluation if they think it's too complicated. It is not necessary to design an outcome evaluation system with treatment and comparison groups. Simply looking at pre and post data, where it is reasonable to believe your school social work intervention had a significant and tangible impact, can be sufficient.

9. *Make sure your evaluation doesn't treat groups differently.* Evaluation processes and measures should be culturally sensitive and data should not be collected in a way that would treat students differently based upon gender, race, socioeconomic status or any other factors.

10. *Make sure the instruments used, if any, will accurately measure the targeted behaviors, knowledge, and/or skills.* As noted above, use of instruments can be avoided by using existing data that is already collected by the school or the greater community. If it is necessary to use an instrument, try to select an existing one that, if not formally evaluated, has at least been field tested in some type of systematic manner, and can be administered over time with reliability. However, if nothing is available, don't hesitate to design your own instrument, especially if your evaluation outcome system is simple and straightforward.

11. *Share your evaluation results with administration, the school board, and the community at least annually.* Don't wait until school social work services are proposed to be cut or eliminated to let people know about the effectiveness of school social work services. Be proactive and make sure you present your evaluation data in a manner that best reflects the positive outcomes of your work.

12. *Use the evaluation data to improve your school social work services.* While outcome evaluation can help document the critical value of particular services and instruction, it should also be used to help improve your school social work practice. If your evaluation is perceived as being self-serving, i.e., done only to protect your job, it may not be as well received by school board members.

STEPS TO DEVELOP YOUR EVALUATION PLAN

Development of outcome evaluation plans for pupil services traditionally has followed these steps: 1) define the services provided, 2) identify the desired outcome(s) of those services, 3) determine or develop a method(s) to measure the accomplishment of the desired outcome(s), and 4) gather the data to assess the level of success. It is the last two steps that can be most daunting and resource-consuming. Even if the expertise, funding and time is available to implement all four steps, there is no guarantee that a school board will value the outcomes of these services, because they may not match its priorities, e.g., academic achievement.

The Baltimore panel, described in the publication from the UCLA School Mental Health Project cited earlier, enhanced and endorsed a proposal from the staff of the Center for Mental Health Assistance on a process for pupil services evaluation.

1. "Define the program (e.g., number of clinicians, funding, provided services).
2. Define the stakeholders for the program and determine their interests and goals.
3. Develop program goals so that they reflect interests of stakeholders.
4. Develop a realistic evaluation plan, focusing on outcomes that are of interest to stakeholders, and that can be collected within the pragmatic constraints of the program.
5. Gain feedback from the stakeholders on the evaluation plan and modify the plan based on this feedback.
6. Implement the evaluation plan and monitor its implementation.
7. Organize program evaluation findings.
8. Present program evaluation findings to representative stakeholders for their feedback and input.
9. Modify and improve the program based on results of the evaluation." (pp. 47-48)

What follows is a step-by-step process which includes most of the steps above, i.e., Steps #2, #4 and #6-8, but is still fundamentally different from traditional outcome evaluation. Rather than starting with and focusing on the school social work services provided (Step #1 above) and the development of program goals (Step #3 above), this process seeks to identify the congruity between the school district's goals, the readily available data collected by the school district, and the school social work services. This helps increase the likelihood the identified outcomes will be valued by the school board and reduces the time and resources necessary to implement the outcome evaluation plan. Please note that while Step #9 is not specifically included in the process below, it is consistent with Conclusion #12 listed above in the previous section of this article, and is a logical and important follow-up. The process that follows is limited to the planning necessary to identify critical data indicators which are readily available or easily obtainable and are of value to the important decision-makers in school districts, and how this data can be used to support the effectiveness of school social work services.

The first few narrative steps of this process described below are represented by the corresponding numbers in Figure 1. The intersection of the three circles identifies the *data collected by a school district* that represents *progress on one or more of the school district's goals*, and reflects *the positive impact of at least some portion of school social work services.*

Figure 1

1

2

3

4

1. *Who is your audience? What stakeholders are you trying to influence? To whom will you present the findings of your outcome evaluation? What does your audience value? What established priorities or goals does your audience have?* Your audience is the people to whom you are accountable. With few exceptions, this will be your higher-level school administration and school board. Building principals and directors of pupil services generally understand and value the contributions of school social workers, because they see the impact of these services in their daily work. However, these are not the people who ultimately determine staffing levels in school districts. The demonstrated positive outcomes of your school social work services need to be consistent with what your audience thinks is important for your school district to accomplish. Almost all school districts have written goals which they use as benchmarks to determine if they are making progress in identified priority areas, e.g., academic achievement, graduation rates, attendance rates, parent involvement. Your audience and goals are represented visually by the School District Goals circle in Figure 1.

2. *Which one or more of your audience's established priorities or goals do your school social work services* **tangibly and significantly** *impact?* Outcome evaluation is not about counting how many home visits were made, support groups were facilitated, or developmental histories were completed, although this kind of data is relatively easy to collect and is useful in documenting what you do. Outcome evaluation is about what tangible, positive changes have occurred that are to a substantial degree due to the provision of your school social work services. Another way to look at this is to ask yourself, if my school social work services were not provided, would significantly less progress be made on any of the school district's priorities or goals? Once again, this question should be asked consistent with the scope of your intervention, i.e., individual students vs. a school-wide program. This is a critical step in the process and you need to set a high standard for which one or more of the school district goals you believe are tangibly and significantly impacted by your school social work services. The greater the impact of your school social work services on any given goal, the more power and influence your results will have on your audience. The school social work services that tangibly and significantly impact one or more school district goals are represented by the intersection of the School District Goals and School Social Work Services circles in Figure 1. The more of your school district's goals your school social work services tangibly and significantly impact, the greater the extent of the overlap between these two circles. It is important to note the degree of overlap of these two circles may vary significantly from Figure 1, e.g., the entire School Social Work Services circle could be within the School District Goals circle.

3. *What data does your school system presently collect that can help document progress on your audience's priorities and goals? What data is available to you? What data is easily obtainable?* School districts collect a great deal of data and much of it is longitudinal, allowing retroactive analysis to evaluate progress. Examples are grades and grade point averages, attendance, tardies, suspensions, expulsions, retentions, a variety of demographic information, at risk students, passing/failing students, academic credits, students receiving awards, results of attitude surveys, abuse and neglect referrals, extracurricular violations, detentions, graduates/dropouts, school age parents, student mobility, disciplinary and law enforcement referrals, 504 students, special education referrals/placed/dismissed, use of student assistance program groups, test scores, parents attending conferences and meetings, students receiving free and reduced hot lunch, students involved in extracurricular activities, and

conduct grades and classroom work habits from report cards. It is important to take the time to make an exhaustive list of available and easily obtainable data from which you can choose in Step #4. This data is represented by the intersections of the School District Goals and Available Data circles in Figure 1.

4. *Which of the identified data are appropriate indicators of the success or progress of one or more of your school social work services?* Of the data you have listed in step #3, which are **significantly and tangibly** impacted by your services? The more reasonable it is for your audience to believe that your services impact the data you are presenting to them, the more likely it is they will conclude the positive changes in the data are at least in part attributable to your services. This data is represented by the intersection of all three circles in Figure 1.

5. *Which of the identified data indicators from step #4 that a) address one or more of your audience's priorities and b) are significantly and tangibly impacted by one or more of your services, will you use and analyze?* At this point in the process, you should have a manageable list of data from which to choose. Which are easiest to access? Which will be most compelling to your audience? On face value to your audience, which data are most impacted by the provision of your school social work services? These are the questions that should guide your final decisions in the development of your outcome evaluation plan for school social work services. Briefly describe the rationale you will use to link each type of data to your school social work services.

EXAMPLE

What follows is a simple example of how school social workers in a school district might follow this process. It is recommended that initial attempts to implement this process be modest and used to help identify critical data that are most indicative of the positive impact of school social work services. Once this is determined, more ambitious evaluation plans can be undertaken.

Step #1 Although there have been no overt discussions about reducing school social work services in the Anywhere School District, the school board is beginning to look at strategies to identify funds to reduce class sizes. While building principals and the pupil services director are very supportive of school social work services, the school board and upper administration appear to see these services as being peripheral to academic achievement. The school social workers decide to attempt to document positive outcomes that are strongly related to one or more of the school district's long-range goals and the provision of their school social work services.

Step #2 The school board annually reviews data related to each of the district's long range goals to assess progress. One of the priority goals of the school district is to increase student attendance. The school social workers decide to focus their evaluation efforts on this goal.

Step #3 They make an exhaustive list of data that their schools collect related to attendance.

Step #4 The primary data the school social workers decide to collect is attendance, tardiness, and chronic truancy. However, they also hypothesize that if the attendance of the students they serve improves, their academic achievement is likely to improve, too.

Step #5 As a way of "field testing" their evaluation plan, the school social workers decide to initially limit their data gathering to one of the middle schools. Data will be analyzed for each student receiving significant school social work interventions for the school quarters prior to, during, and following the services. Attendance and tardiness figures are stored on a computer in the school's office; the school social workers obtain permission to access and download this information periodically. They already monitor all chronic truancy referrals and can easily include this data in their evaluation plan. The school has an established system where all middle school teachers enter the academic achievement data, i.e., scores on homework assignments, quizzes and tests, of each of their students in a computerized database. Teachers agree to periodically print out this information for each identified student and share it with the school social workers in exchange for receiving a summary of the analyzed data.

CONCLUSION

Increased accountability, especially related to academic achievement, is becoming the norm in education. State-wide, standardized tests and revenue limits on school districts are combining to focus the attention of school boards on instruction and services which they perceive as directly impacting academic achievement, sometimes at the expense of other services which may consequently be perceived as more peripheral and less important.

School social workers need to document positive, academic-related outcomes for students that are due, at least in part, to the provision of their work. These outcomes need to be valued by the school board and administration if these people are to believe school work services are core and fundamental to what schools do to help students be successful.

School social workers are encouraged to consider the suggestions and process outlined in this paper to develop their own outcome evaluation plan using readily available data gathered by their respective school districts that reflects progress on their school districts' goals and is indicative of the significant and positive impact of their services.

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